DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 119 183 CS 202 509

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TITLE Languages of Vision: "Black Elk Speaks" in the Classroom.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Fourth Annual Seminar on Language "Living English: Language in the Schools"

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Culture; Higher Education; Imagery; Language; *Learning Activities; Literary Criticism; Metaphors; *Symbolic Language; *Symbols (Literary); *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Black Elk Speaks; Dreams

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses teaching "Black Elk Speaks" in the college classroom and examines how symbolic language is generated in our own experience. An activity is described in which students' dreams were performed in order that the students might better see how the dream functions in "Black Elk Speaks." The activity resulted in a discussion of the differences between shared symbolic language, produced in reenacting a dream statement, and the private, solipsistic language often associated with the term "symbolism." This activity also led to a discussion on problem-solving thought processes as compared with intuitional, or metaphor-making processes. (TS)

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Languages of Vision:
Black Elk Speaks in the Classroom

Helen Jaskoski

Teaching Black Elk Speaks to university students during the past six years has increased, at each reading, my appreciation of the book as a moving and enlightening personal document, a unique part of American literature. But these students (suburban, usually Caucasian, in the center of "mainstream" American culture), have generally found the book baffling, almost impenetrable on first reading. I have listened to students say things like "This book is so different from anything I've encountered, I don't know how to begin asking questions." Complexity as well as strangeness frustrate them: "I couldn't keep track of the characters," and "I tried to diagram some of the descriptions in the dream." Lack of familiarity with the symbology also troubles many, like the woman

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who wrote "I had trouble picturing the virgin in a red dress, because I'm used to thinking of a woman in red as an emblem of sin." After hearing many such statements, I have begun to think of the students' complaints as evidence of difficulties in learning a new kind of symbolic language. For instance, the two meanings of the scarlet-woman image are really a type of interference--in the meaning of an image rather than a verbal entity.

It now seems to me important to learn something of this symbolic language itself and how it works, rather than simply to study the content of the particular statement. Black Elk's vision presented a statement in a language available to members of his culture. However, as the book records, the private statement of his dream is neither comprehensible nor beneficially powerful until the dream has been enacted publicly, by the whole community. By means of the dream's ritual enactment, it becomes public property--part of the community's repertoire of symbols. In contrast, students such as mine mostly think of dreams, metaphors and symbols as private language; furthermore, they consistently take the view (or expect to find in literature the view) that society is essentially alienating, repressive, or in some other way negative in relation to the individual. The notion of a society expressive and supportive of an individual's aspirations, and the sense that even one's most private and spontaneous dreams are expressed in the culture's prevailing idioms--

these ideas are difficult to grasp.

If we were to see how Black Elk's dream might have functioned in his life, and in the book, it might be necessary to examine how symbolic language might be generated in our own experience.

Accordingly, in three different classes during the year I asked if any student would be willing to share a dream, so that we could discuss how to perform it. I explained that in this way we might see better how the dream functions in Black Elk Speaks. In each class several students volunteered dreams, and we chose one each time to consider enacting.

The first discussion focussed on a dream offered by a woman in an American Indian literature class:

> A male creature descended in a spaceship and embraced the dreamer, whereupon both became invisible. He carried her through the air to a neighborhood of backyard swimming pools. They would dive into a pool and then rise again and go on to another; people watching from inside the houses were astonished at seeing only the splashes, but the girl and her companion were ecstatic.

Discussion of this dream involved at first a great deal of talk about props. The class finally decided that desks could serve for houses and bowls of water for swimming pools: since the two main characters were invisible, a splash in a bowl of water could signify the immersion and ascent. It would be necessary to appoint people to take the roles of the dreamer, her companion, and the people in

the houses.

We had time for only a brief reflection on our imaginary recapitulation of Black Elk's kind of experience. The students pointed out the parallel between the cup of water in Black Elk's first cure, the symbolic dish of water in the Pawnee Hako Ceremony, and the swimming pools in the woman's dream: in each, water was a regenerative element. They also noted a parallel between the space-creature and the four grandfathers. In the case of this dream, we were able to see how even the highly individualized language of dreams draws upon artifacts and values common in the culture: swimming pools and spacemen as compared with natural bodies of water and ancestors.

In another American Indian literature class, a man offered to let the class discuss how we might reenact this two-part dream:

> He was standing on a barn roof. Below him, three wolves snapped and snarled. He would fly or float down and tease the wolves, but was able to return each time to the safety of the barn roof. Then the dream changed: he was attached to a kite, flying westward and dipping above the heads of people looking up and watching him from below.

This group of students decided, ultimately, that the dream could be performed without any props. At first they wanted to use a table for the barn roof, but then concluded that it would actually be better to represent the vertical dimension horizontally, allowing the dreamer to

dance his approach and retreat from wolves and people. The parallels between the two parts of the dream were not so obvious as I thought, but after some time the students saw that the roles of people and of wolves could be taken by the same actors. The students then considered how to represent the wolves. At first, imitation growls, snapping and jumping were suggested; then it was decided that the creation of songs and dance steps would provide a better representation.

The exercise was particularly useful in this class because the students were having an exceptionally hard time dealing with the texts of those poems having an animal as the persona, which need to be understood as performed by a dancer. The concepts of persona or mask, of oral performance, and the relation of the two, finally became comprehensible. In this class, as in the first, we also discussed the mutually supportive relationship between the individual and the community, which is implicit in Black Elk's experience, and the way in which a shared or public set of symbols enhances the possibilities of communication. In fact, the exercise, planned to make a point about a literary work and community-centered as distinguished from individualistic value systems, had actually worked in terms of the students' own experience. Weeks later, they still made casual references to the dreams while talking among themselves outside of class; they seemed to have developed a sort of embryonic community symbol-system.

The third experiment I made with this activity was in an interdisciplinary class titled "Liberal Studies in the Arts and Humanities." The course focusses on the conventions of art as languages and on the relationship between spontaneous creativity and deliberate craftsmanship. After the class read Black Elk Speaks, one of the women volunteered this dream:

> The dreamer walked into a frame house on a prairie, where an older couple were talking in the kitchen. Hearing a noise, she looked out the window and saw cattle stampeding past the house. She went into an inner room where a television cowboy star was lying on a bed. She wondered if he knew about the stampede; they could feel the floor shake, but heard nothing. She returned to the kitchen. The stampede had gone past, but then the cattle returned, running backward.

Again we discussed how to enact the dream. The first requisite was to create space. As in the two previous instances the students concluded to make a circle, divided into two areas representing the two rooms. At first, they felt that mimicry and improvised dialogue should represent the human and animal characters, but later favored dance steps and songs. They eventually saw that a few actors could represent a stampede by running several times around the circle and passing the opening designated as a window. They also concluded that make-up and its extension into mask could indicate characters.

This particular episode engendered extensive discussion on the relationship of inspiration and discipline. The

dream is "pure" inspiration, unmediated, personal intuition--the essence of creativity as many see it. Yet in order to make it a work of art, discipline, practice and tradition are required. The construction of masks and costumes, composition of songs, choreography of motion, techniques of make-up--all are necessary to realize the dream.

The class felt that they would have had the kind of experience Black Elk describes if they had actually performed "their" dream, rather than just talking about it. They felt that the experience had given them the potential for a common language. We discussed the difference between a shared symbolic language, produced in reenacting a dream statement, and the private, ultimately solipsistic language they are more used to associating with the term "symbolism." We also continued a discussion on problem-solving thought processes as compared with intuitional, or metaphor-making, processes: the dream itself was an individual metaphor, our discussion was problem-solving, but performing the dream would be a communal symbolic statement.

In the classes I have described, we were trying to learn a tiny part of the grammar of Black Elk's culture. Whether one is investigating literary structure, or modes of cognition--or perhaps other subjects--the exercise has been valuable. In the process of considering a baffling, unfamiliar language we came to some small understanding of our common possession, language itself.